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Iconic fires and the rise of fire prevention in post-war Britain

DR SHANE EWEN

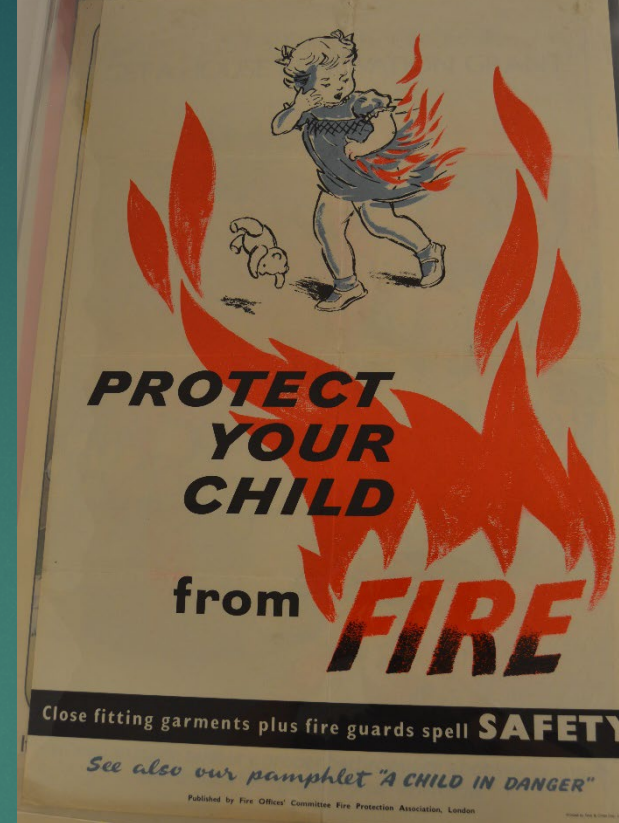
READER IN HISTORY

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JANUARY 18TH 2018

Structure of talk

- ▶ The problem of fire in post-war Britain
- ▶ The emergence of fire prevention
- ▶ Iconic fires of the 1950s and 1960s
- ▶ Legislative reform – Fire Precautions Act 1971
- ▶ Iconic fires of the 1980s and reform
- ▶ Conclusions

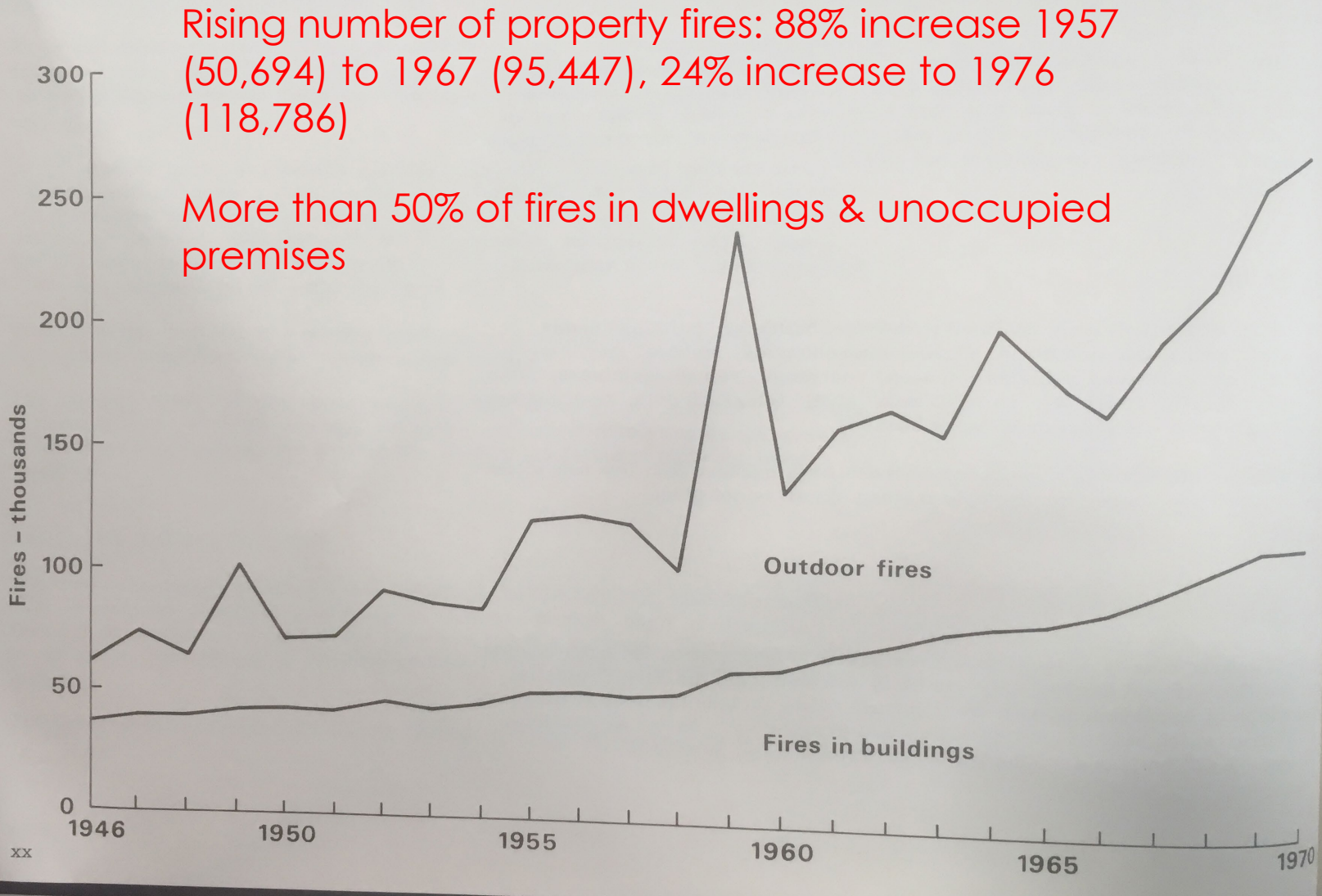




Keep
Matches
out of reach
of
Small
Children

see overleaf

FIGURE 1 ANNUAL INCIDENCE OF FIRES - UNITED KINGDOM 1946-1970



Rising number of property fires: 88% increase 1957 (50,694) to 1967 (95,447), 24% increase to 1976 (118,786)

More than 50% of fires in dwellings & unoccupied premises

More than ¾ of fatalities occurred in the home, & disproportionately killed vulnerable groups

Main causes were children playing, smoking in bed, electrical faults & space heaters

Fire brigades responded to a greater number of SSIs (52,500 in 1967, 81,500 in 1976), e.g. Torrey Canyon (1967), Ronan Point (1968), M62 bombing (1974)

A “golden age”?

- ▶ Fire Services Act 1947 - repealed 2004
- ▶ England & Wales: 125 fire brigades (reduced to 53 in 1974); 11 (8) in Scotland
- ▶ Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council – ‘all interests ... could get together to discuss the efficiency and welfare of the service’ (Callaghan, 1968)
- ▶ Home Office Fire Dept, advised by HMFSI
- ▶ Shift from protection to prevention, e.g. FBU, *A Service for the Sixties* (1960)



Fire prevention

- ▶ Fire Research Station (1935), BRE since 1972
- ▶ Service associations, e.g. Chief Fire Officers' Association, Fire Brigades Union
- ▶ Safety charities, e.g. Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (1916, 1941)
- ▶ Industry bodies, e.g. Fire Protection Association (1945)
- ▶ National campaigns, e.g. "Guard That Fire" (1957), National Fire Prevention Weeks (Fire: Prevent It)



(r) Keighley Mill 1956 – 8 dead due to locked & inadequate fire exits, led to 1959 & 1961 Factory Acts, which extended fire brigade supervision over factory fire safety



(l) Henderson's store fire, Liverpool, 1960 – 11 dead, fire caused by electrical cable fault in a false ceiling, led to 1963 Offices, Shops & Railway Premises Act (OSRPA), which strengthened fire safety through inspection & certification



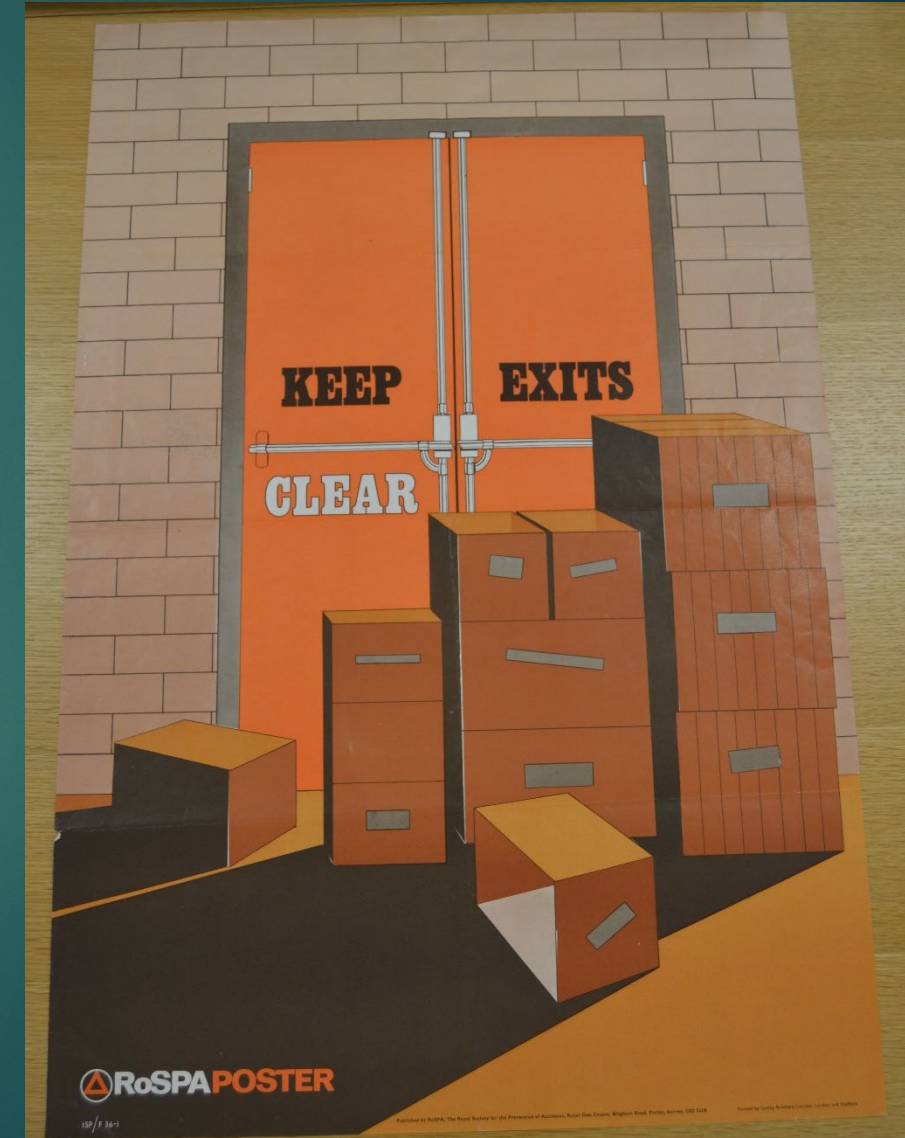
(l) Top Storey nightclub fire, Bolton, 1961 – 19 dead due to single wooden staircase exit, club located above a kitchen unit workshop, led to amendments to 1961 Licensing Act to introduce fire safety inspections

(r) Rose & Crown hotel fire, Saffron Walden, Christmas Day 1969 – 11 dead, fire started in TV set, no smoke-stopping doors or working fire alarm, led to first regulations under the 1971 Fire Precautions Act



Reforming fire prevention

- ▶ Inter-Departmental Committee on Fire Prevention (1962)
- ▶ Report criticised the confused state of existing piecemeal legislation
- ▶ Recommended comprehensive legislation to strengthen & rationalise existing law relating to fire precautions at places of public amusement & resort & in certain kinds of residential premises



1971 Fire Precautions Act

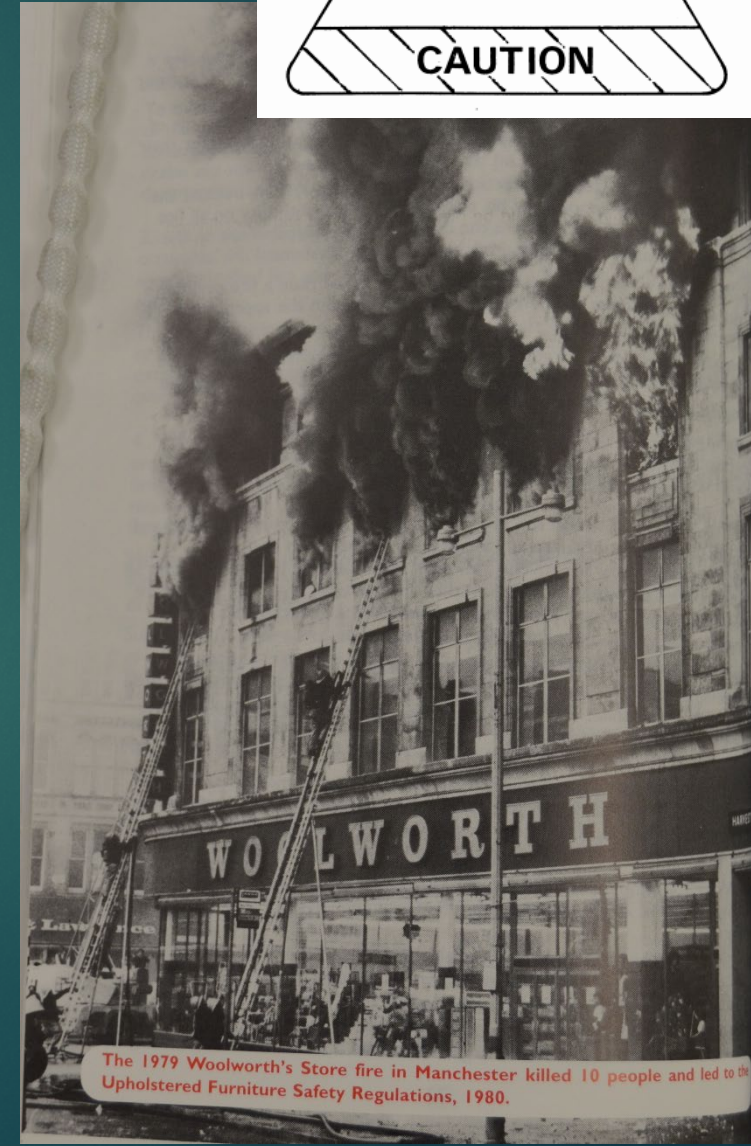
- ▶ Home Secretary has power to designate a particular use for fire safety
- ▶ Inspection & certification by local fire brigades
- ▶ Underpinning research by FRS & CFBAC's Fire Prevention Committee
- ▶ Fire Precautions (Hotels & Boarding Houses) Order 1972



“Blue light” collaboration at the
New Langham Hotel fire,
Bayswater, 11 May 1971 – 8 dead

Into the 1980s: a new era?

- ▶ Manchester's Woolworth's fire in 1979 (10 deaths) led to Upholstered Furniture (Safety) Regulations (1980) – consumer protection laws
- ▶ Home Office Green Paper, *Future Fire Policy* (1980): called for 'greater selectivity in the attack on fire'
- ▶ FBU called for strengthening the scope of the Act
- ▶ Housing Act (1980) extended powers over flats & hostels (1981 Order applied to MOHs)



- ▶ (r) Bradford City Stadium fire, 1985
- ▶ Fire caused by a discarded match under a wooden stand
- ▶ 56 dead, 265 injured
- ▶ Led to Fire Safety and Safety of Places of Sports Act 1987



- (l) King's Cross Underground fire, 1987
- Fire started by a discarded match on wooden escalator
- 31 dead including 1 fire-fighter
- Led to Fire Precautions (Sub-surface Railway Stations) Regulations 1989

Conclusion

1. History shows that we do learn, but we risk forgetting
2. The dangers of thinking in straight lines
3. Importance of collaboration
4. Regulations save lives






FORGED BY FIRE: BURNS INJURY AND IDENTITY IN BRITAIN, C.1800-2000



MENU



Welcome to the project blog for 'Forged by Fire: Burns Injury and Identity in Britain, c.1800-2000', funded by the AHRC and run by the University of Birmingham and Leeds Beckett University.

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